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AUTHOR Pearson, E.
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ABSTRACT

Within the field of linguistics there are several very different approaches to discourse analysis. Sociolinguists look at the structure of social interaction as manifested in conversation. Psycholinguists are concerned with aspects related to language comprehension. Philosophical and formal linguists are interested in the semantic relationships and syntax in constructed pairs of sentences. Computational linguists produce models of discourse processing. All of these approaches can be of value in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. One university ESL teacher in Japan used the results of a study analyzing the agreement/disagreement function in spontaneous, unrehearsed conversation among native English speakers in order to design instruction and choose appropriate ESL materials. The teacher used these findings concerning the types and proportions of expressions of agreement and disagreement to design lessons introducing 10 forms for this function. In addition, the teacher used this information to analyze the appropriateness of the forms taught in two well-known ESL textbooks, and determined that the language presented in them was unlike that of native speakers and in some cases might be considered rude. (MSE)

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RESULTS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPLIED TO THE ORAL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

E. PEARSON

8, SUGA-CHO
SHINJUKU-KU, TCKYO
JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

For the past several years, the field of Linguistics has seen a proliferation of 'discourse analysis' into the oral use of language by native speakers. Do such studies have any practical relevance for the applied linguist or the teacher of oral EFL? This paper attempts to address the above issues by briefly describing the results of one such study and by giving an example of the classroom application of those results.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of research carried out in Linguistics under the appellation of 'discourse analysis'. What is 'discourse analysis', and what do the results of this research have to offer the applied linguist or the teacher of oral English? In fact, do they have anything to offer, and if they do, how, for example, can the results of such studies be applied in EFL classroom situations? This paper is an attempt to address these problems by giving an example of the actual classroom application of the findings of one such study.

First, the term 'discourse analysis' will be discussed in terms of what it means for linguists, and what it can mean for EFL teachers dealing primarily with the oral language. Next, the issue of the relevance or importance of the findings of 'discourse analysis' for the EFL teacher of oral English will be addressed. Following that, there will be a brief discussion of the findings of one such instance of discourse analysis. And finally, an example will be given of how the results of that study have been put to use in an EFL classroom in Japan.

Discourse Analysis - What is it?

The term 'discourse analysis' appears to have almost as many definitions as the people who practice it and/or write

about it (see Austin 1962, Brown and Levinson 1978, Edmondson 1981, Ervin-Tripp 1976, Jefferson 1972, Labov 1973, Sacks, et al. 1974, Searle 1969, Van Dijk 1977, Wolfson 1983).

Scholars working within different disciplines focus on different aspects of discourse. Sociolinguists attempt to describe the structure of social interaction as it appears in conversation and their descriptions emphasize social features which are most amenable to sociological classification. They attempt to generalize across 'real' instances of 'language in use' using transcriptions of spoken data. Psycholinguists, on the other hand, are mostly concerned with problems related to language comprehension. They investigate such problems in short written texts or sequences of sentences using methodology derived from experimental psychology. At the same time, philosophical linguists and formal linguists are interested in the semantic relationships between constructed pairs of sentences and in their syntax. They are also concerned with whether or not sentences can be assigned 'truth values'. Typically, their research is carried out using construed sentences for archtypal speakers and listeners in archtypal situations. Computational linguists are attempting to produce models of discourse processing and must work with short texts in highly limited contexts. Obviously, within the one field of Linguistics, there are several vastly different approaches to discourse analysis and these approaches appear to have little in common.

How then can 'discourse analysis' be of use to the applied linguist or the EFL/ESL language teacher engaged in the teaching of oral English? What use can be made out of this variety of interdisciplinary approaches? The answer is that use can be made of all of them. Brown and Yule (1983a: ix) define discourse analysis, as "how humans use language to communicate and, in particular, how addressers construct linguistic messages to addressees and how addressees work on linguistic messages in order to interpret them." They go on to say that it is primarily concerned with giving "an account of how forms of language are used in communication". At the same time, it is worth remembering Austin (1962: 147) when he said, "The total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (emphasis in original). In examining the trees, one must never lose sight of the forest, or language is inseparable from its context.

Another issue facing applied linguists and oral language teachers is that of deciding which type of oral discourse is most applicable to our general needs, e.g. unrehearsed conversation, formal delivered speech, debate, etc. To this, Stubbs (1983: 10) provides an insight. He states, "Conversation is basic: the commonest use of language, a pervasive phenomenon of every day life which deserves study on those grounds alone.

If only because of its massive occurrence, spontaneous unrehearsed conversation must provide some kind of baseline or norm for description of language in general". Especially for teachers of general (non ESP) oral English, the analysis of "spontaneous unrehearsed conversation" would appear to the most relevant.

Up to this point, it has been assumed that the type of discourse analysis defined above and its results are important to the applied linguist and the language teacher. Are they, in fact, important? The answer is an overwhelming 'yes' for as Brown and Yule (1983b: 52) have pointed out "successful teaching of discoursal competence demands of the teacher that he should analyse the language which native speakers use in discourse, in order that he can ensure that reasonable and realistic models are presented for his students to imitate and base their own performance on. ..... it is the teacher's job to provide the student with the necessary language to make those skills (discourse skills available to him in his native language) work in English" (emphasis in original, parentheses are author's). The results of studies into what native English speakers really do with their language are indeed important to those of us teaching English anywhere.

Having discussed the relevance and importance of discourse analysis for the applied linguist and the oral

language teacher within the definition which encompasses our needs, the second part of this paper will describe the rationale for teaching one particular function in an oral EFL situation in Japan and will briefly describe the results of one related analysis of 'spontaneous unrehearsed conversation' among native English speakers. This will be followed by an example of the practical classroom application of those results.

The function Agreement/Disagreement

The results of a conversational discourse analysis study into the function agreement/disagreement were chosen for specific application in an oral EFL situation in a Japanese university for the following reason.

Three hundred university freshmen in an oral English class were given interview tests (Pearson 1984). These students had not previously received any specific instruction or practice with this function. The results of the tests were that over 50% of the students were either not expressing agreement/disagreement when they could/should have done so, or they were expressing it explicitly, e.g. "I agree" or "I disagree". As the results of the study show, neither response is natural for native English speakers. The teacher felt that more appropriate usage of this function would be

advantageous for the learners as agreement/disagreement is basic to any type of negotiation, and intercultural negotiation is one very important purpose for the study of EFL anywhere in the world.

Results of research into Agreement/Disagreement

The results of the research described below were obtained through the analysis of approx. 900 minutes of taped and transcribed spontaneous, native speaker (American) conversation. The objective of the study was to analyse the language native speakers use when agreeing and disagreeing with one another.*[1] The researcher initially felt, along with Brown and Yule (1983b: 12), that speakers involved in normal every day chat type of conversation "do not typically challenge each other (and) do not argue..." They engage in "a great deal of expression of opinion by one participant which is then agreed to by the other" (Ibid: 13, parentheses are author's). This was, in fact, borne out by the study.*[2] In conversation, it seems that what is required from the listener is 'agreement, 'disagreement' occurs rarely*[3] and when it does, attempts are made linguistically to reduce its challenge or threat.*[4]

Table 1 gives the three most frequently occurring forms and frequencies for each of the categories of 'agreement' and 'disagreement' found in the conversational data.*[5]

It was found that a continuum exists from unequivocal agreement to unequivocal disagreement. The term 'Equal' refers to equal intensities of evaluation on the part of the two participants. 'Upgraded' means the respondant's evaluation was more intense than that of the initial speaker. 'Scaled-down' means the opposite, the respondant's evaluation indicated a lower level. This category is very close to disagreement.

As for 'disagreement' itself, the initial part of a 'Qualified' response, "Yes, but ...", indicates agreement, however the respondant follows that by some type of qualification or contradiction. The 'Opposite/Different with softener' is a more bald expression of disagreement, however here, the respondant softens the force by the use of an explanation or some word like 'perhaps', 'maybe', 'possibly', etc. The most bald or direct expression of disagreement found in the native speaker data was the 'Opposite/Different without softener'. In these examples, the respondants did not use any form of softener. It is interesting to note that nowhere in any of the data collected for this study did the performative, 'I disagree' occur. And yet, the majority of textbooks for oral English on the market in Japan give this form as an expression of disagreement. In addition, a total of 137 instances of agreement were found in the native speaker data,

but only 48 examples of disagreement. This indicates that it is true (at least for the data in this study) that native English speaking conversational participants "do not typically challenge each other (and) do not argue" (Brown and Yule 1983b: 12), and that what is expected in most conversation is agreement. Yet, many textbooks give equal emphasis to agreement and disagreement.

The above was an extremely brief discussion of the results of one instance of discourse analysis of natural sponteneous native speaker conversation. What follows is an example of how the results of the above study were put to practical application in oral English classrooms in Japan.

Application in an EFL situation

Any kind of a question or topic which stimulates group discussion can be used for the presentation and acquisition of this function (see Aitken 1982, Byrd & Clemente-Cabetas 1980, Maley et al. 1980, Rost & Lance 1984 for examples).

Before beginning the first discussion type lesson in classes of low intermediate learners, the classes were presented with the two most frequent forms of the two most generally used classifications for both 'agreement' and 'disagreement'. This means that, for 'agreement', 1) the Token

only and 2) the V of Supposition and/or Ellipis under the classification 'Equal' (Table 1) were chosen, and in the case of 'disagreement', the 'yes, but ...' forms under the classification 'Qualified' (Table 1) were selected. The examples of these forms given the students were the same as in Table 1. It was felt that these were sufficient for the first lesson for this level of learner. As a later date, prior to the next two succeeding discussion type lessons, the classes were introduced to the two most frequently occurring forms for 'Upgraded' and 'Scaled-down', and only the most frequently occurring forms of 'Opposite/Different with softener' and 'Opposite/Different without softener'. Therefore, by the end of the third discussion type lesson, they had learned and practiced a total of ten forms, six for 'agreement' and four for 'disagreement'. It was felt that, for productive purposes, these ten were sufficient for this level learner. Of course, they should be able to recognize other forms and for this, various listening comprehension materials were used with the attention of the learners focused on the elements of 'agreement/disagreement' among the speakers.
For learners at more advanced levels, the forms were presented more quickly and more of them were introduced for productive use. However, even for the more advanced levels, new forms were introduced prior to each of the first three to four discussion type lessons with follow-up leassons for repeated practice and reinforcement.

Introduction of the new forms was carried out before a lesson began by writing the examples (in Table 1) on the board. A brief explanation followed concerning politeness, etc.,and this was followed by coral repetition in response to the teacher's initiating opinions. During the discussion phase of the lesson, the teacher walked around the class listening to the different groups, answering questions and making comments and/or corrections when necessary.

Assessing acquisition

For teachers of oral English, assessment has always been a headache. How does the teacher test the learners to determine if they have learned a function, or any other aspect of oral English? For this purpose a painting was chosen, 'Time Transfixed' by Rene' Magrite, and in small groups the learners discussed what they thought the picture might mean while the teacher sat apart making notes on and evaluating each learner's performance according to a predetermined set of criteria (see Pearson 1984 for a discussion of oral evaluation).

Agreement/disagreement and two textbooks

The results of the discourse analysis study of agreement/ disagreement in unrehearsed, spontaneous native speaker conversation revealed that responses made by one speaker to the opinions given by the other speaker are overwhelmingly agreement, 74%; disagreement occurring only rarely, 26%. Furthermore, when

disagreement does occur, it is usually of the 'yes, but ...' form which begins with an indication of agreement and only then reveals a qualification or contradiction.

Many ESL/EFL oral English textbooks claim to teach conversational English as it is really spoken by native speakers. A further study comparing the results of the agreement/disagreement study with the way the same function was presented in two well known ESL/EFL textbooks revealed that the number of examples of agreement and disagreement given were equal in one test while the other text gave more examples of disagreement than agreement. Students would be led to believe that native speakers of English disagree much more than is the case. Furthermore, the same comparison showed that the most frequent types of agreement/disagreement among native speakers were infrequently represented in the texts or not given at all. Students following both texts would disagree too often and would both agree and disagree in very direct and bald forms which, in some cases, could actually be offensive to native speakers, while, at best, they would appear almost rude.*[6]

At least for the two textbooks used in this comparison, it is obvious that the language presented is not what native speakers really say. Teachers of oral English must exercise great care in selecting textbooks and they must be knowledgeable about what native speakers really do say and do with their language. Discourse analysis research is of great concern to both the

applied linguist and the language teacher in the creation and selection of teaching materials and their use in the classroom.

In conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to address the issue of the relevance of the findings of discourse analysis for the applied linguist and the oral English teacher. A short description of the results of one such study was given along with an example of the application of those results to the EFL classroom in Japan. It is hoped that this brief explanation will serve to stimulate oral language teachers to become increasingly aware of the ongoing research in different areas of discourse analysis and to use their imagination in finding ways to bring those results into their classrooms. In conclusion is Brown and Yule's (1983b: 52) message to all language teachers. "Successful teaching of discoursal competence demands of the teacher that he should analyse the language which native speakers use in discourse, in order that he can ensure that reasonable and realistic models are presented for his students to imitate and base their own performances on."

1. The definition of the function 'agreement/disagreement' is as follows. "When a speaker assesses a referent (given an opinion) by assigning it

1) Some degree of certainty/uncertainty ..., or

2) Some characteristic or quality with or without a positive/negative value judgement,

then 1) 'agreement' can optionally follow as a response if the responder holds the same assessment of the same referent as the producer of the prior opinion, or 2) 'disagreement' can optionally follow as a response if the responder holds a different or a qualified assessment of the same referent as the producer of the prior opinion" (Pearson 1985: 100-101).

2. For a complete description of this study, see Pearson 1985.

3. In fact, out of approx. 900 minutes of recorded conversation, 'disagreement' occurred only a total of 48 times while 'agreement' occurred 137 times.

4. Actually, 44% of the instances of 'disagreement' fell into the 'Qualified', or "Yes, but ..." category, i.e. initial agreement followed by a qualification.

5. The examples given for each form were concocted for ease in comprehensibility and comparison.

6. For a complete description of this study, see Pearson 1985.

Table 1. (Continued)

ISAGREEMENT

Qualified (21)

) Opine but Opine (11)

A: That's beautiful.

B: It is beautiful but it's very bright.

) Ellipted forms (7)

A: That's beautiful.

B: Yeah but it's very bright.

) Reportative but Opine (2)

A: That's beautiful.

B: I agree, but perhaps it's a little bright.

Other Forms (1)

Opposite/Different with softener (19)

1) Explicit negative with accounting (7)

A: That's beautiful.

B: No, it's not beautiful because it's too bright.

2) Explicit negative with uncertainty marker (4)

A: That's beautiful.

B: No, perhaps it's not beautiful.

3) Accounting with/without Antonym (4)

A: That's beautiful.

B: It's too bright.

Other Forms (4)

Opposite/Different without softener (8)

1) Explicit negative without accounting or uncertainty marker (4)

A: That's beautiful.

B: No, it's not beautiful.

2) Token without accounting or uncertainty marker (3)

A: That's beautiful.

B: Huh uh.

3) Different without accounting or uncertainty marker (1)

A: That's beautiful.

B: It's strange.

Other Forms (0)

ote: The bracketed numbers indicate the number of times the form occurred in the data.

Table 1. Forms and Frequencies from the Conversational Data Listed by Categories of Politeness

GREEMENT (137)

Equal (80)

) Token only (34)

A: That's beautiful.

B: Yeah.

) V of Supposition and/or Ellipsis (15)

A: That's beautiful.

B: I think so too.

) Direct repetition (14)

A: That's beautiful.

B: It is beautiful.

Other Forms (17)

Upgraded (38)

1) Added Intensifier (9)

A: That's beautiful.

B: It's very beautiful.

2) Token with Support and/or Upgrading (9)

A: That's beautiful.

B: Yeah, really.

3) Raised degree of certainty (7)

A: I suppose it will be crowded.

B: It probably will be.

Other Forms (13)

Scaled-down (19)

1) More moderate term of evaluation (7)

A: That's beautiful.

B: It's nice.

2) Decreased degree of certainty (4)

A: You know that perfectly well.

B: I guess so.

3) Redirection of positive evaluation (3)

A: That's a beautiful dress you're wearing.

B: My mother got it for me.

Other Forms (5)

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